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March 5, 2007

## Testimony of Randi Faith Mezzy Before The Public Health Committee on HB 7069

### Members of the Public Health Committee:

I am an attorney with Connecticut Legal Services, one of four legal aid organizations working to enforce the rights of Connecticut's poor people. I have represented many children in their efforts to get proper dental care under the Medicaid program. Despite their legal right to get any care that will make them healthy, the reality is that lack of participating dentists has the same effect on my clients as if the Medicaid HMO simply said "NO! You can't have dental care!" A legal right is meaningless when it can't be enforced just because there is a lack of places to get care.

Rather than thrill you with tales about my clients, I would like you to read the attached article that appeared in the New Haven Register on February 10 of this year. The Levy Dental Group opened its doors to community children and its staff spent the entire day doing what it could to fill the overwhelming need. When I went to have my teeth cleaned last week, Dr. Levy and his staff shared with me their horror at what they saw: kids with rotted teeth, kids in pain, 12-year-old kids who had never seen a dentist in their lives. They plan to continue to provide this service, but they shouldn't have to do it on a special day once or twice a year. Their wonderful care should be available to all of these children.

There isn't one child in this state who is too poor to pay for dental care who wouldn't be eligible for one of our many HUSKY programs or state-funded programs. Somehow the Department of Social Services isn't reaching parents the way it should. DSS isn't making it easy enough to enroll in HUSKY. But most significantly, there are not enough dentists currently providing care under HUSKY to fill the need, because DSS is not paying them enough.

You have the power to change this. You can see by the participation in Levy Dental Group's open house that if DSS will provide the free dental care, people will flock to get it. Please pass HB 7069 and provide a reasonable rate for dental care for Connecticut's poor children.



## NewHavenRegister.com

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### Free dental services for kids

Cara Baruzzi, Register Staff

**-NEW HAVEN —** Sitting in a chair getting his teeth cleaned at Levy Dental Group Saturday, 8-year-old Jose Meneses couldn't help but smile.

"I like the water," he said, giggling as dental hygienist Sherry Fucci squirted water into his mouth to rinse his teeth.

His mother, Socorro Carreto of New Haven, also couldn't stop smiling as she looked on. With no dental insurance, this was a rare opportunity for her son to receive the dental care he needs.

Levy Dental Group, at 921 State St., provided free services to low-income children all day Saturday as part of the American Dental Association's "Give Kids a Smile Campaign." Every child who visited got a cleaning, examination, fluoride treatment, X-ray and screening — typically costing \$150 to \$200 — for free. The staff also treated any dental-related pain.

"It's very expensive to take the kids to the dentist," Carreto, who speaks Spanish, said through a translator. "I can't believe that an opportunity like this happened to me and my family."

Carreto, who also brought her 15-year-old daughter, Briseide Meneses, to the event, heard about it through her church, St. Louis in West Haven. "I'm very grateful."

The American Dental Association runs the "Give Kids a Smile Campaign" each February as part of National Children's Dental Health Month. As of Saturday, 14,314 dentists had participated and 751,085 children had been treated nationwide this year, according to the association's Web site.

Most of the patients who visited Levy Dental Group Saturday had little or no insurance and cannot typically afford routine visits to a dentist's office, said Fucci.

"The response is overwhelming," she said. At times, the waiting room became so packed that children were waiting more than an hour to be seen, but didn't seem to mind. Most of them, she said, spoke only Spanish.

"We've had kids who have never been to the dentist," Fucci said, adding that most parents want their kids to go to the dentist but can't afford it without insurance. "It's very frustrating because the access is limited."

It was the first time Levy Dental Group held this type of event but Dr. John Levy said he plans to do so annually and hopes other area dentists will participate as well.

"It's been terrific," he said, and rewarding to know that he and his staff provided care to children who would not receive it otherwise.

About 25 staff members volunteered to work on Saturday, a day when the practice typically is closed.

"My entire staff is passionate about dental care," Levy said. "But there's a lot of kids out there who aren't even exposed to it."

For Romelia Flores of West Haven, the offer of free dental care for her children was too good to pass up. Two of her children, 14-year-old Joel and nine-year-old Claudia, got their teeth cleaned, X-rayed and examined.

"Dental services are so expensive," Flores, who speaks Spanish, said through an interpreter. "This was a good opportunity."

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